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India is escalating Kashmir conflict by painting it as terrorism

The greatest threat to Indian security is communal violence, not terrorism.

[Idrisa Pandit](#)

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Indian army personnel stand guard in Jammu after the revoking of Kashmir's special status. | PA Images

In 1992, I witnessed an Indian soldier hit a pregnant Kashmiri woman with his rifle butt and utter these words, "get rid of the terrorist you will birth." That incident, forever etched in my mind, for me epitomises how the Indian armed forces, that operate with absolute impunity in the region, view Kashmiris. It is the very same perception that governs the minds of the right-wing, ideologically driven Hindu nationalists and their supporters who are celebrating the recent division and annexation of Kashmir. They see it as a victory over barbaric Muslims whose land and women are waiting to be conquered.

In October, a senior Indian government figure likened the decades-long Kashmiri struggle for self-determination to terrorism. Bipin Rawat, chief of the Indian army, similarly justified the months-long clampdown in Kashmir as "a communication breakdown between terrorists in the Kashmir Valley and their handlers in Pakistan". This is in spite of warnings from a former Indian national security adviser that the greatest threat to India is social and communal violence, not Pakistan or China.

The reframing of the Kashmir conflict as a fight against terrorism readily finds support among anti-Muslim ethno nationalists and far-right political leaders. Within India, the BJP government is stoking Islamophobia by using religion as an instrument of identity politics. And the Indian media's portrayal and characterisation of Muslims only reinforces the status of Muslims as the other and Islam as the enemy.

Using fear of terrorism, governments have undermined fundamental human rights and civil liberties of their Muslim citizens.

Since 9/11, Muslims have been routinely dehumanised and demonised. Systemic and institutionalised anti-Muslim racism has targeted Muslims all over the world, especially in the West. Using fear of terrorism, governments have undermined fundamental human rights and civil liberties of their Muslim citizens. And the well-oiled pseudo-expert Islamophobia industry has fostered stigmatisation of all Muslims, and promoted Islam as a source of universal “terror”.

Kashmiris indigenous struggle for self-determination predates the partition of India in 1947. Except for a short period of armed resistance in the early 1990s, the movement has been primarily non-violent. The response to Kashmiri resistance, however, has always been violent. India portrays the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination as a fanatical religious movement, a jihad against India – an image that helps project Kashmir as an issue of “terrorism”.

In my own research on Muslim youth resistance in Kashmir, while some youth invoked religion as a reason for fighting against oppression, there was no evidence they considered their struggle as a religious one. At the same time, the youth did predict that if the Indian government continued to suppress non-violent resistance, some may once again be inclined to pick up arms. That change became evident in 2016 when reports surfaced of some young men resorting to armed struggle.

The government of India recently estimated there are 200 militants active in Kashmir. Inspite of such a small number of suspected militants, the recent reinforcement of tens of thousands of additional forces in the world’s most militarised region was once again justified in terms of curbing terrorism. In reality, as we know now, the military build up was merely to impose and manage unilateral changes to the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir without the will of the people.

The scale of death and destruction in Kashmir in the last 30 years is hard for some to fathom. To date, close to an estimated 100,000 Kashmiris have been killed, thousands disappeared, 10,000s injured and maimed, and 1,000s tortured. Women and children have been victims of the violence, including sexual violence.

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The spurious excuse of "fighting terrorism" and ushering an era of development and gender equity in property rights, provides cover for the documented ongoing human rights violations which include illegal detentions, torture, sexual violence, expropriation of land, murder, collective punishment, censorship, closure of educational institutions,

and preventing access to essential services. Such sham arguments only boost right-wing narratives that are fuelling violence against Muslims of Kashmir. Unfortunately within India and elsewhere there seems to be little resistance, even in left liberal intellectual circles, to equating Islam with terrorism, and Muslims as terrorists.

India has even been effective in selling the narrative of "curbing Muslim terrorism" to international trade partners, including Muslim autocrats of the world. While the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation issued a perfunctory statement of concern about Kashmir, it ignores the oppression of Muslims by the current Indian regime. While 8 million Muslims are under siege in Kashmir, the United Arab Emirates awarded the prime minister its highest civilian award – annual trade between the two countries is valued at around \$50 billion. Saudi Arabia, another trade partner with bilateral trade to the tune of \$28 billion, also bestowed its highest civilian award to the prime minister in 2016. After Kashmir's autonomy was revoked in August, Saudi Aramco announced \$75 billion in investments in India's oil and chemical business. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are also planning to build a mega refinery in India, an investment of another \$60 billion.

The world's so-called largest democracy has numbed the world into accepting the dispensability of Kashmiri Muslim lives. Land grabs, ecological degradation and settler colonialism is being normalised. The leaders of various nations, placing their economic interests above their moral conscious, have ignored the serious threat of Hindutva, and the violent toll of Hindu nationalism, including the stripping of millions of Indian Muslims of their citizenship and plans to detain them in camps.

The world's powerful must shift their focus to promoting co-existence and peace instead of demonising Muslims. Human rights groups have issued warnings about the risk of genocide taking place in Kashmir. Labelling Kashmiris as terrorists and dehumanising them does nothing but further destabilise a region where nuclear war is a possibility.

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